Returning UWSP students pump millions into local economy
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Written by Nathan Vine, Stevens Point Journal Media

As students begin to move into residence halls on the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point campus Thursday, they’ll bring more than boxes of clothes, microwaves and laptops. They’ll bring a stream of cash, and lots of it.

The start of classes means that local businesses will see millions of dollars of economic activity as students spend on everything from housing and furniture to books, pizza and more.

Lori Dehlinger, executive director for the Portage County Business Council, said the university generates around $408 million for the local economy each year. The more than 9,000 students and 400 teachers who occupy campus during the school year represent one of the county’s main economic drivers, Dehlinger said.

Stevens Point Mayor Andrew Halverson said the students who attend UWSP create an atmosphere that makes the city unique and attractive to people and businesses.

“The students create a cultural sense of who Stevens Point really is and a sense of vibrancy we can’t replace or reproduce in any way,” Halverson said.

Kevin Polito, owner of Polito’s Pizza, said his business has experienced strong support from UWSP students since opening in downtown Stevens Point in July 2007. He now has locations in two other UW System cities, Oshkosh and La Crosse, and earlier this year opened another next to St. Norbert College in De Pere.

“This definitely gets to be one of our busier times during the year. Our nights are starting to get a little hectic, but it’s good to see them back,” said Polito, who plans to open his eighth location in Green Bay later this year.

Poltio said he has about 24 employees in Stevens Point, some of whom are college students who stayed in town over the summer. He said the resumption of classes will require him to hire about four additional people for the school year to keep up with students’ insatiable demand for pies.
Jaime Mayer, store manager of Target at 5300 Highway 10 East, said the store is set up to accommodate college students looking for anything from clothes to dorm room supplies. The layout of a Target store is determined by the demographics of the local community, and with the Stevens Point store, the proximity to UWSP was taken into account, Mayer said. Mayer said that about 40 percent of the store’s employees are either UWSP students or graduates.

Target switched from sales focused on elementary, junior high and high school students to college students about mid-July, and now the store has sections dedicated to items such as mattress pads, hangers, towels and storage carts and food such as macaroni and cheese and ramen noodles — all stuff that sustains college students.

Mayer said Target will team with UWSP and nearby Buffalo Wild Wings for a third annual Back to School Night, when students will be shuttled by bus to the store from 9:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Last year, around 1,400 students attended the event.

“It’s a lot of fun. We close the store, have prizes we give away, and we have a DJ,” Mayer said. “It’s kind of a Black Friday for the students, and it helps us connect with them and show them what we have.”

Reporter Chris Jones contributed. Nathan Vine can be reached at 715-345-2252. Find him on Twitter as @SPJNathanVine.